

Circassian Drama & Theatre: A Brief Introduction

[АДЫГЭ ТЕАТР: ХЭЗЫГЪЭГЪУАЗЭ]

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One of the first instances of dialogue in Circassian literature is in the ancient tale 'The Elegy of the Maid who Refused to Marry Her Brother' («Дэльхум дэкIуэн зымыда хъыджэбзым и уэрэдыр») which gives us a glimpse of those far away days when incest was not yet tabooed. The poor girl begs the members of her family in turn to let her inside the house. Such stories are considered the forerunners of Circassian drama.

— А си анэ дыщэурэ,
А си дыщэ плъыжь,
Мы бжэр нысхуIупхыркъэ,
door.
ЩIыIэм сегъалIэри.

— My dearest Mother,
Radiant as red gilt!
I beseech you: Open this
The chill is killing me.

— Си гуащэжъыр жыпIэтэмэ,
mother-in-law,
НыпхуIусхынт.

— If you would just call me
I would open it for you.

— Си псэ тIэкIур пытурэ
Дауэ пхужысIэн.
my bones.

— How can I call you thus,
Whilst there is still life in

In the introduction to Ziramikw Qardenghwsch''s work *Circassian Tales* (1963), the Circassian writer and researcher Askerbi Shorten (Шортэн Аскэрбий) maintains that this text occupies a very special place not only in Circassian tradition, but also in human social development. Incest was abandoned a very long time ago by mankind, and this elegy provides us with a vestige of those far away days when this practice was not yet tabooed.

Modern theatre and drama as an independent genre saw the light in the early Soviet era. As in other literary genres, early dramatists had a rich tradition to fall back on. Light themes extracted from oral tales, such as jokes, situation comedies, satire, short stories and fables were used very extensively at first. Even today, very few playwrights fail to take scoops out of the ancient treasure chest for adornment and even for themes.

Theatrical societies were set up in the 1920s. However, faceless bureaucrats in the Ministry of Culture of the USSR soon assumed the reins of the theatre movement and regulated all theatrical activities in accordance with Party dogma. Although Circassian theatre developed enormously in a short time, a plateau was soon reached. The creative process was stifled and experimentation and broaching of some themes were not allowed.



Pioneers of Circassian drama & theatre.

One of the most influential and popular figures in Circassian theatre was Ibrahim Tsey (1895-1936), who studied law and became famous as a writer of legendary tales and plays. Many of his fables were collected and published.¹ He was a great patriot and dedicated his life to the dissemination of Circassian culture, organising the Adigean National Theatre Institute and the drama theatre in Ekaterinodar in 1929.

Another important dramatist was Kuba Csaban (Gebelli; 1890-1974), who taught Circassian literature in the Drama Institute in the Adigean Autonomous Region in the 1920s and 30s. He penned many plays like *The Night Raid on Kabarda* («Къэбэрдей жэщтеуэ»),² which tells of a Russian nocturnal attack of Kabarda in the 18th century, and *Yistambilak'we*

¹ Dumézil, G. and Namitok, A., *Fables de Tsey Ibrahim (tcherkesse occidental)*, Paris, 1939.

(ИстамбылакIуэ; 'The Great Exodus'), on the forceful expulsion of the Northwest Caucasians. In Jordan, he directed and produced some of his plays, which were staged at cinema theatres with casts of enthusiastic volunteers. The public was entranced by the shows performed in the mother tongue.

The poet and dramatist Pschiqan Dzado Shejehesch'e (ШэджэхъэщIэ Дзэдзу и къуэ Пщыкъан; 1879-1937) and writer and playwright Zhansex'w Mirzebech Nalo(ev) (Нало Мырзэбэч и къуэ Жансэхъу; 1906-1937) wrote the tragedy of *Korgat*, which was staged at the Nalchik Theatre in 1934. The former engaged in anti-religious rhetoric directed mainly at mullahs. The latter, who was the first president of the Kabardino-Balkarian Branch of the Union of Writers of the

² Angered by the continued expansionist policy pursued by Russia into their country, despite persistent protestations, the Kabardians resolved in the spring of 1779 to rid their country of Russian presence and undo the Russian fortresses that had been constructed in the northern parts of their territory. The Circassians mobilized their forces and began to fight back against Russian expansion. In response, Empress Catherine II instructed the Governor General of Astrakhan, Prince Potemkin, to pacify Kabarda by fair means or foul. General Jacoby was given his marching orders. He conducted an offensive in Kabarda, which lasted all summer. After the arrival of fresh enforcements from Russia, the expedition succeeded in penetrating deep into Kabardian lands. At the end of September 1779, a fierce battle was fought in which the Kabardian force, taken unawares, was massacred. About fifty princes and more than 350 noblemen were killed, a huge toll by the reckoning of those days. Dubbed 'Qeberdey Zheschteiwe' ('Kabardian Night Assault'), the battle marked one of the bleakest days in Kabardian history. The war is referred to by the Kabardians as 'Meziybl Zawe' («Мэзибл зайэ»; 'The Seven-Month War') or 'Qwrey Zawe' («Къуреи зайэ»; 'The Qwrey War'), the place where it all took place. By December, the Kabardian princes were defeated and the northern frontier of Kabarda retracted to the rivers Balhq (Malka) and Terch (Terek).

USSR, was persecuted in the Stalin purges. He was arrested in the summer of 1936 and executed in 1937, but was rehabilitated posthumously in 1957.

The writer and dramatist Askerbiy T. Shorten (Шортэн Аскэрбий; 1916-1985; Honoured Art Worker of the Kabardino-Balkarian ASSR and Honoured Art Worker of the Russian SSR) published *The Theatrical Art of Kabardino-Balkaria* on the history and development of Kabardian drama and theatre in Nalchik in 1961.³ Born in Kabarda in the village of Leskan II in 1916, he wrote many plays, for some of which the music was written by Arseni M. Abraamov and Truvor K. Sheibler, two of the most influential composers in Kabarda in the first half of the 20th century. In 1940, Abraamov wrote *Batir Village* (Аул Батыр), an overture for symphony orchestra based on Shorten's famous play of the same name (staged in 1939), and Sheibler for *Qanschobi and Gwascheghagh* («Къанщобийрэ Гуащэгъагърэ») and *For Ever* (staged in 1957). Muhedin F'. Bale (Балэ Мухъэдин) based his symphonic suite *Qizbrun* («Къызбрун»; 1959) on Zalimx'an Aqsire's play of the same name (written in 1954; on the tragic fate of a Kabardian woman in feudal times) performed by the Kabardian Theatre Group. Other works include *Picture, Some Household*, and *When the Light Is On* (written in 1947; on life in a kolkhoz farm; Russian translation in 1950).

Hesen Qwedzoqwe's (Къуэдзокъуэ Хъэсэн) very popular poem 'The Poet and History' («УСАКИУЭМРЭ ТХЫДЭМРЭ»)

³ Shorten's historical novel *Bgirisxer* [«Бгырысхэр»; *The Mountaineers*] (Nalchik, 1954; Russian translation appeared in 1967) is considered as one of the masterpieces of modern Circassian literature.

(1992) was dramatized and shown on TV [shot and directed by Dr. Mohy Quandour].⁴



Hesen Qwedzoqwe, Circassian poet.

Theatre companies & drama groups

The Drama Theatre in Kabardino-Balkaria was established in the early 1920s, with two national companies, one for the Kabardians, the other for the Balkar. In the mid-1950s, the Kabardian National Theatre staged *The Song of Daxenaghwe*, which, according to Maria Menapece, 'is an outstanding drama in verse which draws its themes from Circassia's most ancient heroic epos ... Its rare artistic qualities ... place it on a level with ... Gerhart Hauptmann's *Die versunkene Glocke*, or Maeterlinck's *L'Oiseau Bleu*.'⁵

⁴ An audio recording of the drama is available at <http://iccs.synthasite.com/circassian-drama-and-theatre.php>.

⁵ 'Review of *Soviet Kabardian Dramaturgy*, Moscow, 1957 (214 pages)', by Maria Menapece in *Caucasian Review*, Munich, no. 9, 1959, pp 139-44. [The following works are discussed: 1) *The Song of Dakhanago* [*Daxenaghwe*], Zalimkhan Aksirov (Акъсырэ Залымхъан); 2) *The*

Written by Zalimx'an A. Aqsire (Акъсырэ Залымхъан; Aksirov; 1919-1995) in 1942, *Daxenaghwe* («ДАХЭНАГЪУЭ»; name of the heroine; literally: 'Brown-eyed Beauty') was kept in the repertoire of the Theatre for a long time due to its popularity.⁶ It was devoid of Communist dogma, which corrupted many plays of the time, like *The Testing* by Hechiym Teiwine (Теунэ Исхъэкъ и къуэ Хъэчим; 1912-1983), and Shorten's *When the Light Is On*. Other plays by Aqsire include *Lashin* (Лашын), which was written in 1946 on the theme of the well-known Nart heroine.

The Kabardian State Drama Theatre (in the Name of Aliy Schojents'ik'w) staged many works of local and Soviet writers, including Biberd Zhurt's *If the Head Is Abed, Woe unto the Feet* («ЩХЪЭМ ИМЫТМЭ, ЛЪАКЪУЭМ И МЫГЪУАГЪЭЩ»; *Schhem Yimitme, Lhaqwem yi Mighwaghesh*), which was staged in 1972. Outstanding actors of the Theatre Company included Vladimir Yiwan (Иуан Владимир), Valera Balhqiz (Балъкъыз Валерэ), and K'wne Zchach'emix'w (ЖъакІэмышъу КІунэ).

The National Theatre in Bakhsan in Kabardino-Balkaria staged many works of Circassian and other North Caucasian playwrights. In addition, classical works were produced, like Molière's splendid comedy *Le Malade imaginaire* in 1974 [rendered «ЗАЛЫМЫГЪЭКІЭ ЯГЪЭІЭЗЭ» (*Zalimighech'e Yaghe'eze*) in Circassian]. The company's amateur actors included Beit'al Bax'we (Бахъуэ БетІал), who is also an accomplished poet, Fat'iymet Mereimiqwe (Мэремыкъуэ

Testing, Khachim Teunov (Теунэ Хъэчим); 3) *When the Light Comes On* {sic}, A. Shortanov (Шортэн Аскэрбий)]

⁶ The Circassian classical musician Vladimir Mole (b. 1940) wrote the opera *Daxenaghwe* (Дахэнагъуэ) in 1969 based on Zalimx'an Aqsire's play.

Фатимэт), Muse Qebarde (Къэбардэ Мусэ), He'iyshet Ghwch'e (ГъукIэ Хъэлишэт), Sufyan Hemdex'w (Хъэмдэхъу Суфян), Hemiydbiy Vzhenich'e (БжэныкIэ Хъэмидбий), and Lyuba Abdoqwe (Абдокъуэ Любэ). There is a memorial plaque in the theatre for the actors who fell in World War II, including A. Ghwo (Гъуо), S. Qenemghwet (Къэнэмгъуэт), Q. Shibzix'we (Шыбзыхъуэ), S. Nartizch (Нартыжь), T. Qambiy (Къамбий), Q. Qereghwl (Къэрэгъул), and not forgetting Hetu Teimirqan (Темыркъан Хъэту; Temirkanov), President of the Art Directorate in Kabarda at the time.

The Adigean State Drama Theatre was established in Adigea in 1937. It has a Circassian section that stages plays in the Circassian language.



The Adigean State Drama Theatre.

One of the popular themes in Soviet times was the heroism of Andeimirqan [Андемыркъан].⁷ The Circassian Robin Hood

⁷ Andeimirqan (b. circa 1509), the equivalent of Robin Hood in the Circassian ethos, was a contemporary of the 16th-century potentate Prince Beislhen (Beslan) (son of Zhanx'wet), nicknamed 'Pts'apts'e' ('The Obese'), who is credited with modifying the structure of the peerage system and updating the *Xabze*. Andeimirqan was the progeny of a *mésalliance*; his father was a prince, his mother was of unknown stock. According to one legend, he was found by Andeimir while on a hunting expedition. When his hound barked at the trunk of a tree, he wondered what the matter was, only to find a twig-basket perched on a forked branch. He brought it down and found a tiny baby covered in the basket. Andeimir, who was childless, was joyful at the find, and he brought up the child as his own. Andeimirqan grew up to be an intrepid horseman. The news of his exploits went far and wide. He was in the entourage of Prince Beislhen, and one day while the potentate was on a hunting expedition – carted in a carriage, as the Prince was too large to fit on a horse – the Prince took aim at a wild boar, but missed the mark, and the boar fled into the forest. As the boar was driven out of the forest, the Prince took another aim, but missed again. However, Andeimirqan's arrow pierced the boar and stuck him to the Prince's carriage. By some accounts, it was there and then that Beislhen resolved to get rid of Andeimirqan. He instigated Qaniybolet, one of Andeimirqan's closest friends and younger brother of Prince Temriuk Idarov, to betray him. One day, Qaniybolet asked Andeimirqan to go out with him on a hunting expedition. A contingent of Beislhen's troops lay in ambush, and they put the hero to the sword. Some analysts maintain that the murder was a result of the internecine war for supremacy over Kabarda, as Andeimirqan, despite the obscurity of his mother's lineage, could have claimed the mantle of sovereignty for his warrior character and bravery. It is thought that Andeimirqan was killed before 1552. He was Christian. At the time, the Circassians

was used as a symbol of the struggle between the legions of darkness, in this case the aristocracy, and the advocates of light. The first writer to use the motif was M. Qaniqwey (Къаныкъуей). However, his work was deemed as being unworthy of publishing by the Union of Writers, and the manuscript was lost during World War II. In the 1930s, Abdul Pschinoqwe wrote the play *Andeimirqan*.⁸ In 1974, Zalimx'an Aqsire wrote a play of the same title in verse relying on tested historical and oral styles. He also made use of a narrator (ІуэтэжакІуэ; 'wetezhak'we).

Among famous actors were X'wsain Toqwiу (Токъуий Хъусайн) who portrayed Qazbek, Romeo, and Jeriymes (Джэримэс) [from Aqsire's play *Daxenaghwe*], Muhediyn Sekrek (Сэкрэк Мухъэдин), and Beshiyr Shibzix'we (Шыбзыхъуэ Бэшир), who played a mean Demon in Pushkin's classic *The Demon*. In 1992-1993, Hebas Beischtoqwe (Бещтокъуэ Хъэбас) translated and published King Lear in the literary journal 'Waschhemaxwe (Іуашхъэмахуэ).

venerated Dawischjerjiy (St. George) and Yele (Prophet, or St. Elijah), in addition to their pagan gods. It was Beislhen Pts'apts'e's son Prince Qaniqwe who left Kabarda (in the second half of the 16th century) to establish the Beislheney (Beslanay) nation-tribe. A full account of Andeimirqan, his exploits and murder can be found in Z. Qardenghwsch', 1969 (1970), pp 223-336.

⁸ The identity of the playwright of this play is in dispute. There were two writers bearing the surname Pschinoqwe in the 1930s: Abdul and Mechre'iyl. In his *Today's Kabardian Soviet Prose*, L. Qeshez (Къэшэж) cited the work as having two joint writers: Mechre'iyl and A. Bole (Болэ; Bolaev).



The writer and literary figure Hebas Beischtoqwe.

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